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AUTHOR	Gardner, John N.
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ABSTRACT

This issue examines the problems and issues that affect students in the first year of college and reviews current institutional efforts to enhance the learning and retention of first-year students. It also offers a set of suggestions for trustees who seek greater understanding and more active engagement in campus decisions related to the first year. The first months, weeks, and even days on campus are the time in which students make decisions about whether they want to pursue higher education seriously and whether a particular institution is the right place for them. Research evidence makes it clear that resources invested in the first-year student pay off. The best programs for first -year student seminars involve outstanding faculty members, last a full term or longer, involve a high percentage of the first-year students, and are challenging, credit-bearing, degree-applicable courses. One of the most promising approaches if that of learning communities of thematically linked courses for single, and usually small, cohorts of students. Service learning, academic support services, and health education are areas through which the experience of the first-year student can be strengthened. Trustees are advised to help the institution make the first year a high priority. Several case studies complement the discussion. (SLD)

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Number 17, Fall 2001

AGB Priorities

A membership service of the Association of Governing Boards to help trustees and chief executives identify and address strategic policy issues.

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Focusing on the First-Year Student

JOHN N. GARDNER

WITH MICHAEL J. SIEGEL AND MARC CUTRIGHT

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Focusing on the First-Year Student

BY JOHN N. GARDNER

WITH MICHAEL J. SIEGEL AND MARC CUTRIGHT

THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE is one of life's most crucial and memorable transitions. The degree to which students achieve success navigating this watershed year exerts an enormous influence on their academic progress, career pursuits, and social endeavors. What happens to first-year students on campus also directly affects an institution's fiscal vitality and its ability to achieve its primary academic mission.

The well-being of first-year students directly affects your institution's ability to achieve its academic mission and maintain fiscal vitality.

Yet rarely do boards of trustees commit significant time, energy, or interest to systematically investigating how the first year is designed and implemented—and to what ends—on their campuses. This seeming indifference persists despite the fact that nearly half of the 90 percent of freshmen who say they expect to graduate from college emerge from high school without having taken the college preparatory courses most likely to enable them to do so, according to a recent report by the National Commission on the High School Senior Year.

As a trustee of Marietta College in Ohio (where, by the way, I had a miserable first year), I am aware of the myriad issues that compete for trustee attention: recruiting top faculty; maintaining competitive sports programs, facilities, and student services; and raising funds to help the institution keep pace with changes in technology, to name a few. But among all these "first priorities," the inaugural experience of our students merits particular scrutiny and attention.

This issue of *Priorities* will explain why. It examines the problems and issues that affect the first year and reviews current institutional efforts to enhance the learning and retention of first-year students. It also offers a set of suggestions for trustees who seek greater understanding and more active engagement in campus decisions relating to the first year. At its core,

John N. Gardner is distinguished professor emeritus of library and information science and senior fellow of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina. He also is executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, hosted by Brevard College and supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Michael J. Siegel and Marc Cutright are research associates with the policy center.

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Boards should understand how their institution organizes and delivers new student orientation, whether attendance is required, whether it includes an introduction to academic life, or whether it is merely "fun and games."

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this report grows out of my belief that our efforts as trustees and educators to foster, promote, and support communication about the first year of college must be purposeful and powerful.

My views are based on 32 years of frontline experience as a faculty member and on my work since 1981 as the leader of a national and international reform movement to improve the first-year experience. I have visited hundreds of campuses and convened thousands of college and university educators at major conferences to consider how best to design and deliver a range of academic experiences that might result in first-year student achievement, retention, satisfaction, and ultimately, graduation. The creativity and commitment of these educators are extraordinary, and we are making progress. Yet much remains to be done.

Exploring First-Year Problems. Although the freshman year is the baptism by fire in the undergraduate experience, it historically has commanded little in the way of respect, focus, or significant resources from higher education officials. Theodore J. Marchese, the managing director of the Academic Search Consultation Service who is a trustee at Eckerd College in Florida, speaks of an implicit bargain some institutions used to strike with first-year students: "Don't expect too much of us, and we won't expect too much of you." Typically, no single individual or office was really "in charge" of the first year. Rather, ownership and responsibility, if present at all, were diffuse and difficult to identify.

Beginning in the mid-'80s, a number of concerns converged and brought about a greater willingness on the part of colleges and universities to assume responsibility for first-year student learning and retention. By 1995, according to an American Council on Education survey, 82 percent of responding institutions reported a significant focus on the first-year experience, more than double the percentage reported eight years earlier.

Chief among the concerns driving first-year initiatives is the alarming attrition rate between the first and second years. Although the aggregate number of potential students currently is on the upswing, first-to-second-year attrition, according to American College Testing (ACT), still hovers at 28 percent for public four-year schools and 25 percent at private four-year schools (and up to 50 percent at open-admissions institutions). This can create severe fiscal difficulties for institutions that rely primarily on tuition revenues.

Another hot-button issue surrounding the first year that has aroused widespread public criticism is the quality of undergraduate education generally and first-year education in particular. Complicating the equation is the increasing influx of college students for whom higher education was never expressly designed—among others, students whose second language is English, adult students who work, and students with learning and physical disabilities. (For more information on the range of experiences that shape undergraduate life, read "Understanding Today's Students in a Changed World," by Charles C. Schroeder, *Priorities* No. 15, Fall 2000.)

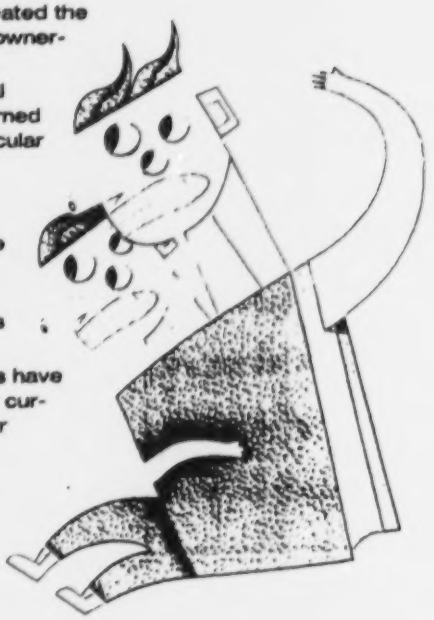
When I went to college in the early 1960s, the typical first-year student was 18 years old, enrolled full-time, lived in a dorm, did not work at a job off campus, and was supported financially by his or her parents. Those days are gone, and demographically speaking, our students will continue to change. A large segment of the

Illustrations by Andrew Skwish

Taking First-Year Efforts To the Next Level

Once a first-year program is in place, trustees should participate in evaluating progress. Here are some questions to pose a year or two into the program:

- Have campus administrators and academic leaders been able to reallocate resources, particularly money, to support first-year initiatives?
- Is there evidence of durability and consistency? Is there a reasonable track record to suggest commitment, or have these been "flash in the pan" efforts?
- Has the commitment to first-year success permeated the institution's culture and functions? Have faculty taken ownership of these issues?
- Has the campus been recognized by professional groups for its efforts? Have the first-year initiatives earned external financial support? Is there evidence that particular programs are considered "best practices" by other colleges or universities? Have these practices been emulated elsewhere?
- Has the campus gathered information to evaluate programs and used that information, on a continuous cycle, to improve efforts and raise goals?
- Have regional or disciplinary accrediting agencies taken positive note of the campus's efforts?
- Is there evidence that programs for new students have influenced innovations in other areas, such as broader curriculum revisions or creation of a transition program for seniors?



public believes high school students are inadequately prepared for postsecondary education, and many faculty and administrators believe too many high school students begin coasting academically once their plans for college are in place. Despite these concerns, there are few truly effective partnerships between colleges and high schools that address the issue of college preparation and effectively link high school and college courses.

Why Is the First Year Important? As educators have focused more intentionally on the various problems related to the freshman year, we have increasingly realized that students' experiences during this critical period lay the foundation, for better or worse, for the rest of their college lives. As Frank Borkowski, chancellor of Appalachian State University, observes, "Our campus efforts to enhance the total commitment to our learning environment all start with freshmen."

The first months, weeks, and even days on campus are the time when students will make decisions about whether they seriously wish to pursue higher education and whether a particular college or university is the best place for them. During this period, they will experience increased personal independence, and they will form study habits and educational commitments

Case Study

Kennesaw State University—Building a Culture of Student Success

Just off the interstate along the corridor that separates Chattanooga, Tenn., and Atlanta lies Kennesaw State University. Chartered in 1963 by the University System of Georgia, Kennesaw State started as a junior college but has grown steadily into a master's-level institution. President Betty L. Siegel, now in her 20th year and the senior president in the state system, says: "I feel like I have been president of four different institutions. The institution has changed in name as well as function over the years, from Kennesaw Junior College to Kennesaw College to Kennesaw State College, and now Kennesaw State University. There is a great sense of renewal here."

In the midst of this change, and with an unprecedented enrollment increase—1,219 percent from 1966-2000—one thing has remained constant: the institution's fundamental commitment to student success.

Kennesaw State launched the "Freshman Year Experience" program 18 years ago, the cornerstone of which is the Freshman Seminar course. The course is so popular that some 80 percent of entering students voluntarily register for it. This elective is taught by faculty from various disciplines, staff, and administrators and is worth three credits. Designed to introduce students to the available resources and programs of the university, it focuses on time management, career decisions, and developing interpersonal relationships with students and faculty.

The newest aspect of the program, and one that helped garner the institution a "notable mention" in the September 2001 *Time* magazine "Colleges of the Year" listing, is the Communities for Learning Success. The communities are cohorts of 25 entering students who take a freshman seminar course concurrently with a freshman composition course and one other general education course.

Board chair Michael Coles, the founder of the Great American Cookie Co. and the person for whom Kennesaw's business school is named, describes the work of the college as "entrepreneurial." Coles explains that the Freshman Year Experience program has improved and expanded over the years to reflect changes in student demographics and in the campus itself. "The

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that will persist through their college careers.

Students will have their first encounters with faculty and will form judgments about their capabilities, interests, sensitivities, and accessibility. They will make tentative decisions about an academic major—decisions that either may contribute to their success and intellectual involvement or that are unrealistic and unachievable—and many will change their major more than once.

During their first terms of college, students select friends and informal role models. These choices are among the most important young people make during their college experience, and their decisions will directly affect their success and satisfaction, as well as your institution's ability to keep them enrolled. They make choices about group affiliation, participation in sports, and use or abuse of alcohol and drugs. Traditional-age students also are most likely to explore romantic relationships and redefine their relations within their families.

Adult students face a different list of academic and personal issues. Although adults often are more motivated than 18-year-olds, they often underestimate their academic abilities and approach first-year classes with anxiety. Most adults also are juggling family and work responsibilities and face high levels of personal stress and potential conflict with employers, spouses, or partners.

In a nutshell, the first year for nearly all students is a significant transition to a new phase of life. But a central philosophical debate swirls around the issue of responsibility: Who has primary responsibility for student engagement and success—students themselves or the institutions in which they are enrolled? A recent study by the National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education found that the public believes that while high schools are primarily responsible for ensuring their students are learning, the students themselves bear primarily responsibility for their success by the time they enroll in college, often a

Priorities

program exists for the purpose of retention, but it goes beyond that," he says. "There is a larger mission to enhance student success. There is committed presidential leadership and great energy among the faculty. This doesn't happen by accident."

As a testament to her commitment to student success, President Siegel changed the title of the chief student-affairs officer five years ago to "vice president for student success." For its attention to students, Kennesaw has become, as Coles puts it, "the model university for best practices—not just in the state, but nationally."

Coles describes his governing body as "an active board that does not live apart from the school. The trustees don't want to live in a vacuum." To stay in touch with the students' perspectives, board members periodically invite student leaders to talk. Coles also spends a great deal of time speaking with student groups on campus, routinely telling them: "Stay in school! This is a great place. Don't let outside forces take away from what you need to be doing as a student. Be the best you can be in what you do."

Historically a commuter campus, Kennesaw State soon will build its first residence halls, which once again will change the campus culture for entering students. Coles and Siegel say the campus is excited about the new dimension the residence halls will add to student life. After all, as Coles says, "The school belongs to the students."

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mere three months out of high school.

This attitude is consistent with the long-held notion of "academic Darwinism"—that only the fittest students survive and flourish, and the weakest fall by the wayside. Such beliefs, in effect, have relieved institutions of significant responsibility for student success. And in spite of more contemporary concerns about student attrition, this attitude persists among many college faculty, administrators, and trustees.

Trustees cannot afford to subscribe to a "survival of the fittest" philosophy for higher education. For the sake of the educational imperative in democracy, for the students themselves, and for the survival and growth of our institutions, we must find ways to support today's students as they pursue their educational aspirations and the American dream.

Lily Roland Hall, a trustee emeritus of the University of South Carolina, warns that we cannot leave the success or failure of first-year students to chance. "During my 16 years of trustee service at an institution noted for its commitment to freshmen," she says, "I realized that from a business point of view—not just from our caring and humanitarian view—we spend so much on recruiting them, that we should do everything we can to keep them."

It is not in society's interest to educate only the "cream of the crop." And the evidence is clear that resources invested in the success of first-year students yield positive results.

Current Efforts at Improvement. "We don't have just one isolated 'freshman-year thing,'" says Appalachian State Chancellor Borkowski. "We integrate a multiplicity of freshman-year programmatic efforts into the total fabric of the institution."

A growing body of research suggests that for new students academic success, satisfaction, and retention are highly correlated with the following factors:

- high levels of academic preparation;

- commitment to the institution and to academic goals;
- involvement in the life of the campus;
- interaction with faculty (especially out of class) and other students; and
- high levels of academic engagement, "active learning."

These factors have become primary objectives for many current first-year initiatives and can be used as a sort of litmus test for new program development. Following is a review of some of the most effective interventions currently in use on many campuses across the country. Each supports one or more of the aforementioned success factors.

Orientation, advising, and residence life. The staples of the first year are orientation, advising (academic and personal), and residence life, all of which play a critical role in supporting a successful transition to the institution and to higher education in general. Unfortunately, these services often are on the periphery of institutional life. These functions either can be dynamic, responsive areas of the new-student experience or reasons for student dissatisfaction and departure. Boards should understand how their institution organizes and delivers new-student orientation, whether attendance is required, whether it includes an introduction to academic life, or whether it is merely "fun and games."

Including families in orientation activities is extremely important for boosting the comfort level of new students and building their future support of the college or university. Take a close look at advising and ascertain the extent to which advisers are trained, evaluated, and rewarded for their important work. And visit your campus's residence halls to become familiar with the living conditions and the student-life program. Would you want your children living there?

First-year seminars. First-year seminars are special courses designed to introduce students to the collegiate experience and to teach them how to master it. They are considered on many campuses to be one of the primary agents of socialization and success for first-year students. Long known to significantly improve the retention and success of entering students, first-year seminars today are offered at more than 71 percent of U.S. colleges and universities.

The best programs involve outstanding faculty members, last a full academic term or longer, involve a very high percentage of first-

year students, and are challenging, credit-bearing, degree-applicable courses. Topics typically covered include effective study skills, time management, orientation to campus facilities, drug and alcohol awareness, dating, responsible sexual behavior, and the value of a diverse student and campus environment.

Learning communities. Of the current curricular structures designed to improve student-learning outcomes, one of the most promising is the concept of the "learning community." A learning community comprises thematically linked courses, in pairs or clusters, in which a single and usually small cohort of students is enrolled. Although learning communities can be employed during any year of college and at any institution, they may be especially important for first-year students on commuter campuses. By taking more than one class with a single group of students, commuting students are more likely to make friends and feel connected to the campus.

On residential campuses, learning communities may be coupled with planned residence-life experiences. This approach is based on the idea that students who live and learn together are likely to be more engaged by continuing conversations in their living environments that have begun in the classroom, and vice versa. The growth of learning communities has been an intentional effort to integrate both the academic and social experiences of students. Bottom line: First-year students who have been part of a learning community earn higher grades and are more likely to persist in college.

Service learning. Impressive efforts are under way at many colleges and universities to promote the civic engagement of students. One method of linking civic engagement to the curriculum is through "service learning"—course-based learning that is actively derived from a required contribution to community service. National research shows that many first-year students have a strong interest in community service, emanating from their previous experiences in church or high school. Service learning continues that pattern of civic engagement but also integrates it into the curriculum. Because service learning is inherently active, relevant, and experiential, it enlivens first-year courses, promotes interest in course material, and responds to many students' preferences for "hands on" learning experiences.

But the service-learning component of a

Case Study

College of the Holy Cross—"How Then Shall We Live?"

"How then shall we live?"

That simple but profound question posed by Leo Tolstoy has for ten years been the framework for the First-Year Program at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass. Each year, participating faculty from diverse disciplines consider the question. For 2001-02, the more pointed query posed to the first-year class is this: "In the struggle for authenticity amid conformity, how then shall we live?"

The faculty leading the program, after deciding on a yearly theme, design eight discipline-specific courses around it. Six one-week units of the yearlong program are given over to reading and discussing books or sets of writings related to the year's question. Common readings for this year's theme, for example, will include *Night*, by Elie Wiesel; "Letter from Birmingham Jail," by Martin Luther King; and the 1998 novel *The Intuitionist*, by Colson Whitehead.

The Holy Cross First-Year Program grew out of a sense—and the findings of formal reports from the campus—that students were not fully engaged in their educations, and that out-of-class social life centered on alcohol consumption. Some who offered comments suggested that the faculty were disengaged from students as well, a presumed price of becoming a more research-oriented institution.

The First-Year Program was launched a decade ago as a five-year pilot to address these concerns. At the end of the pilot period, virtually every indicator of success—improved classroom performance, more campus leadership, more community service, higher retention and graduation rates, and so on—was in clear evidence, despite no discernible entry differences between First-Year Program students and those who did not elect to participate. The program has continued essentially in the format in which it was launched.

About 160 of Holy Cross's first-year students participate in the program each year, a number determined by a confluence of student interest, residence hall capacity (First-Year Program students live in the same residence hall), and the ability of faculty to staff the program and still maintain disciplinary offerings. Those 160 students are about one-quarter of the first-year class. About one-third of Holy Cross's 200 full-time faculty, both junior and senior, have participated in the program. They have helped students learn "good academic citizenship," while occasionally teaching courses out of their disciplinary comfort ranges and "learning with the students," says David Damiano, a mathematician and this year's director. Select sophomore alumni of the program serve as peer facilitators.

In addition to the eight thematic seminars, the common readings, and the residential program, First-Year Program students attend a series of cocurricular events during the year—films, concerts, lectures, performances, and other events tied to the yearly theme and the common readings.

Holy Cross graduate and trustee Joe Donelan looked at the First-Year Program and saw benefits that he didn't receive as a student in the 1970s. "When I was at Holy Cross, the college was isolated from the city, and it was a loss for Worcester, for the students, and for the college," he said.

To advance that connection—which is one of the service and involvement goals of the First-Year Program—Donelan recently donated $1.2 million to the college to establish the Donelan Office for Community-Based Learning. Experiential, community-based learning will be combined with classroom learning to explore even more facets of the question, "How then shall we live?" And among the benefits of Donelan's gift will be strengthening that examination for the first year and beyond.

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course—integrated as an academically rigorous requirement in the same manner as any term paper, assignment, or exam—must encourage the student to be reflective. Reflection promotes more active learning, ties classroom concepts to the practical realities of a service experience, and unites academic theory and everyday practice, all of which enhance civic engagement.

Service learning is established on the basis of reciprocity: The college and community give as well as receive, and both are teachers and learners. In the best and most effective forms of service learning, citizens of the community are included as teachers and evaluators. Service learning has positive effects on student engagement and helps instill a powerful sense of

Chief among the concerns driving first-year initiatives is the alarming attrition rate between the first and second years.

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belonging to both campus and community. It is therefore an influential factor in raising an institution's first-year student-retention rate.

Academic support services. The recent growth in campus-based academic support services benefits not only students who need to improve basic skills, but also those who have strong academic abilities and want to be even more competitive for entry into graduate or professional schools. Essential support services include writing centers, math labs, technology-support programs, counseling (both academic and emotional), services for students with learning disabilities, career centers, and services for student athletes. Research shows that resources committed to providing these types of academic support yield higher student retention and greater academic achievement.

One special type of academic support is the "summer bridge" program, generally offered to at-risk students during the summer between high school and college. Many schools, including some elite institutions, offer such programs to provide a needed sense of community for participants and a head start on the challenging task of learning the academic requirements of a college or university.

Assessing students' skills, knowledge, and academic capacity is central to the effectiveness of academic support programs. Although baccalaureate-level higher education has witnessed a trend away from remedial or developmental courses (often for political reasons, and not necessarily sound academic ones), many institutions find these programs warrant continued institutional investment, and some embrace them as part of their mission. Countless students who started in remedial or developmental courses ultimately are graduated from college and today lead highly productive and successful lives.

Recruiting upperclassmen. Research shows that the greatest influence on college students is their interaction with other students. Hence, many colleges are recruiting, selecting, training, and rewarding outstanding undergraduate student leaders to mentor and appropriately influence new students. These student leaders serve in various capacities, such as peer counselors, advisers, and course assistants, especially in first-year seminars.

One effective use of student leaders is in a program developed at the University of Missouri-Kansas City called Supplemental Instruction (SI). Now replicated by more than 700 institutions in the United States and abroad, SI focuses on improving academic success in courses that historically have a 30 percent or greater rate of Ds, Fs, or withdrawals. SI trains faculty who teach these difficult first-year "killer" courses to recruit and train student leaders to facilitate voluntary weekly supplemental classes. These courses provide students another opportunity for clarification and review of difficult concepts. Students who participate regularly in SI earn significantly higher grades than do nonparticipants.

Health education. Over the last two decades, many colleges and universities have focused attention and resources on serious health issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, eating disorders, and binge drinking. These problems can affect any student at any level; however, they seem to have a disproportionate effect on first-year students, many of whom are influenced by the overwhelming desire to fit in socially and gain approval from peers. This indulgence in newfound freedoms appears more common today than it was in the 1950s or early 1960s.

Concerns about excessive drinking, now higher education's foremost public-health problem, are moving trustees to action. For example, DePauw University trustee James W. Emison has taken the initiative to convene a national group of higher educators to take a fresh look

Trustees cannot afford to subscribe to a "survival of the fittest" philosophy for higher education.

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at this challenge. Although these problems are not new in college and university settings, they have reached epidemic proportions, especially within the last years. Parents are increasingly holding institutions accountable for student behavior, and no trustee wants to face an anguished parent (or the parent's lawyer) who has suffered a child's preventable injury or death. Campuses need professionally staffed programs to address these issues.

Once again, upper level students also play an important role. While first-year students often tune out adults they perceive to be acting "in loco parentis," they are more likely to take seriously warnings from fellow students who can discuss the dangers of alcohol, sexual decisions, or eating patterns that threaten mental or physical health. Boards should ascertain the status of such campus initiatives to determine how their institution's efforts compare with those of others.

Ask the Right Questions. Trustees may find it difficult to know where to begin in examining their institution's commitment to improving the academic and social dimensions of the first-year experience. Although commitment to first-year student success is now universally endorsed and supported in concept, some higher education officials have difficulty articulating and defining the ingredients of effective programs and assigning front-line responsibility and bottom-line accountability.

Trustees can help bring more focus and attention to these issues. By monitoring certain areas and asking the right questions, board members will find a basis for discussion with

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Case Study

University of South Carolina at Columbia—An Array of Transitional Programming

"I don't think I have ever learned more in a single class."

"My University 101 class turned out to be a lot more demanding than I thought it would be. But I'm glad I took this course."

"I loved it. It was a very warm and fun environment, full of enthusiasm."

These testimonials, given by students who have completed the University 101 course at the University of South Carolina at Columbia, suggest not only substantial accomplishment and satisfaction among the students who have taken the course, but also how far the course has come from its origins. Conceived by the institution's president, University 101 was introduced in 1972 as a first-year experimental elective in response to students protesting the war in Vietnam, as well as other perceived social injustices and campus issues. The course was an effort to build trust and understanding and open lines of communication among students, faculty, and administrators.

Today, University 101 and its associated offerings enroll some 2,700 students, more than are enrolled in all but three colleges at the university. Students conditionally admitted to the university must take the semester-long, three-credit-hour course, but all first-year students are encouraged to enroll, and more than 75 percent do so.

Objectives of the course include the development of academic, critical-thinking, and decision-making skills, technological savvy, campus involvement, knowledge of campus resources, and planning for a major and career. Consistent with a liberal arts focus, the course requires substantial writing.

University 101 instructors are chosen through an application process. Requirements include a minimum of a master's degree and completion of an instructor training workshop. Interest in teaching the course is greater than the number of slots available, and potential instructors are cautioned that securing a section is a "privilege subject to approval." Instructor workshops are offered twice yearly, and each

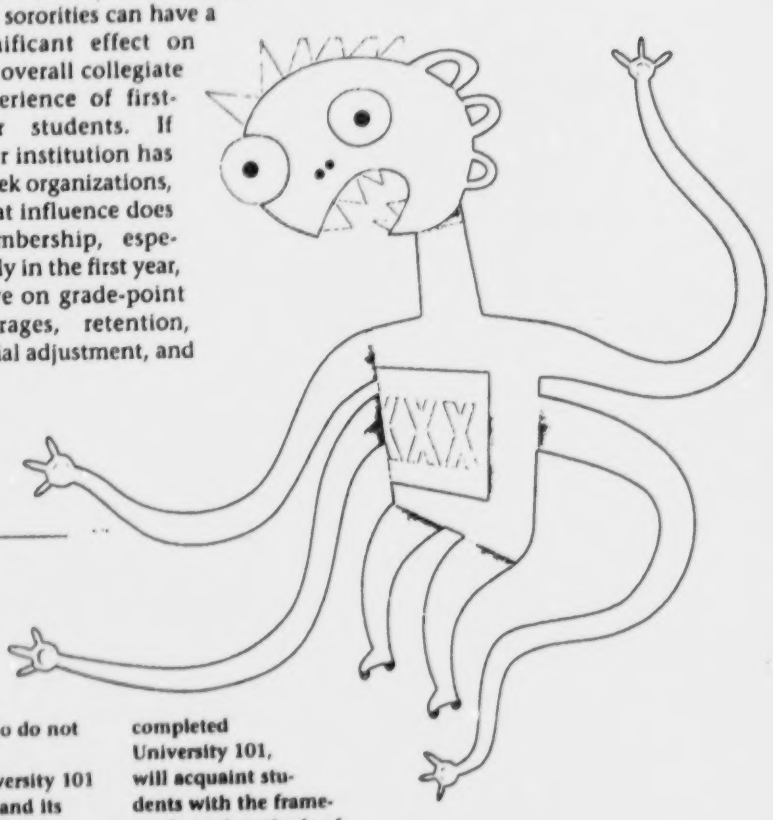
institutional leaders, staff, faculty, and other stakeholders.

• *The importance of being intentional.* How intentional is your college or university about its efforts to make new students successful, as opposed to leaving desired outcomes largely to chance? How much assistance does it provide to assimilate new students into the institution's unique campus culture and values, and what form does this assistance take? How effective is your campus's "basic training" for its new recruits?

• *Orientation for new students.* Who is in charge of student orientation? Are the length and timing of orientation programs appropriate and effective, and does the content sufficiently espouse and convey academic values?

• *Academic advising and planning.* What is the quality of academic advising for new students? Is first-year advising an institutional priority, or do new students suffer from "leftover" advisement and course selection? Does your institution require students to select a major in the first year? How does it treat students who are undecided? The quality of assistance in helping students determine an academic major may be a potential turning point in their quest for academic success and personal satisfaction.

• *Greek life.* Fraternities and sororities can have a significant effect on the overall collegiate experience of first-year students. If your institution has Greek organizations, what influence does membership, especially in the first year, have on grade-point averages, retention, social adjustment, and



draws 30-40 participants.

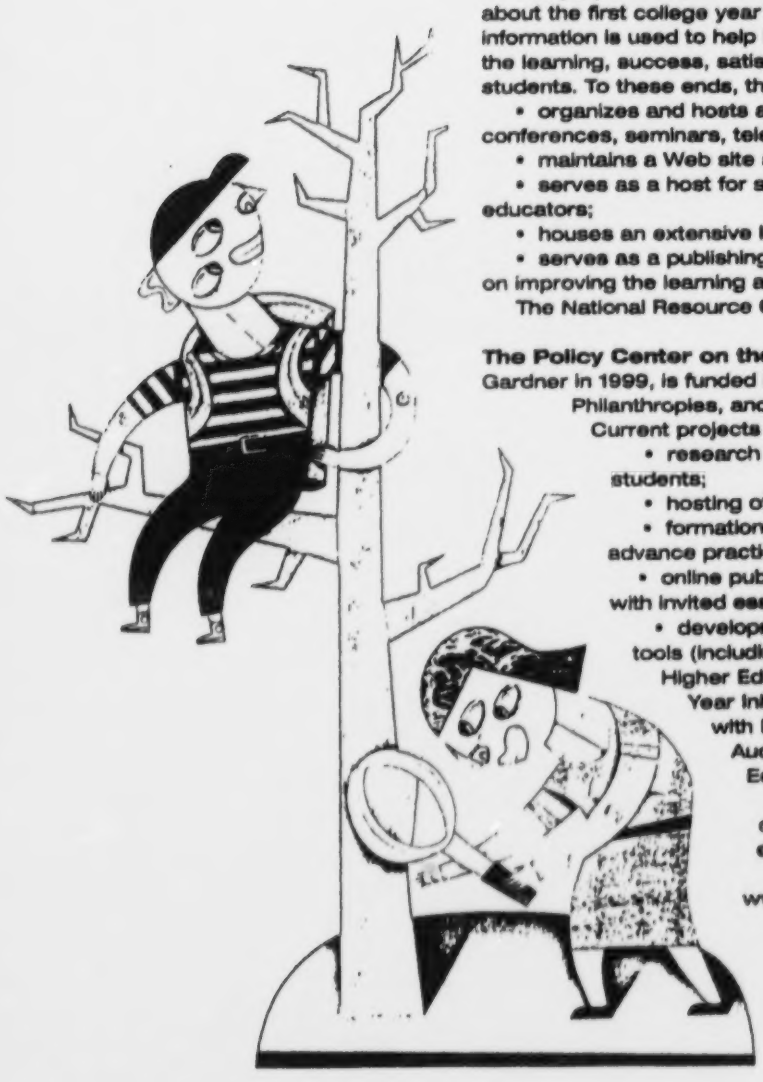
Instructors are encouraged to invite three-to-five special-topics presenters each semester, and more than 60 individuals have volunteered to speak on such topics as study skills, date rape, professional ethics, and critical consumption of news and entertainment media. Special programs involve upper level students as peer leaders, role models, and instructional assistants. First-year seminars are among the most closely examined and assessed courses on campus, and researchers consistently have found that University 101 course graduates earn higher grades, are more involved in curricular and extracurricular activities, and graduate at higher rates than students who do not take the course.

The success of University 101 has led officials to expand its goals and share its principles with other institutions. Among the spin-offs is the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (see page 12). South Carolina also offers University 401, the Senior-Year Experience, a capstone course that further integrates the academic experience, helps students plan their postgraduate lives, and examines the citizenship roles demanded of college graduates in contemporary society.

Also in development is University 201. This course, for sophomores or others who have completed University 101, will acquaint students with the frameworks and methods of research and inquiry in particular disciplines. The development of the course is supported by the Hewlett Foundation, with matching support from the university. By year three of the offering, the university will assume full financial responsibility for the course.

"Retention is just too narrow a concept," says Professor Dan Berman, director of instruction and faculty development for the University 101 program. "University 101 is not a survival course. This is not a picture of desperation. This is a story of university and individual success."

Two Research Centers Are Devoted To First-Year Students' Success



The National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, founded by John N. Gardner in 1986 and now led by Mary Stuart Hunter, is an outgrowth and extension of the University of South Carolina's University 101 first-year seminar course begun in 1972 and directed by Gardner from 1974-99.

The purpose of the center is to collect and disseminate information about the first college year and other significant student transitions. This information is used to help higher education officials and faculty enhance the learning, success, satisfaction, retention, and graduation of college students. To these ends, the center does the following:

- organizes and hosts a series of national and international conferences, seminars, teleconferences, and workshops;
- maintains a Web site and four topical listservs;
- serves as a host for sabbaticals and visits from scholars and educators;
- houses an extensive library resource collection; and
- serves as a publishing house for an extensive list of publications on improving the learning and success of students in transition.

The National Resource Center's Web site is www.sc.edu/fye.

The Policy Center on the First Year of College, founded by John N. Gardner in 1999, is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Atlantic Philanthropies, and is hosted by Brevard College in North Carolina.

Current projects include the following:

- research on institutional best practices for first-year students;
- hosting of forums and institutes for institutional leaders;
- formation of a statewide consortia of institutions to advance practices, cooperation, and peer-supported learning;
- online publication of a first-year-assessment magazine with invited essays;
- development, with key partners, of new assessment tools (including the "Your First College Year" survey, with the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA; the "First-Year Initiative" survey of first-year-seminar students, with Educational Benchmarking, Inc.; and the "Data Audit Toolkit," with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems); and
- dissemination of research through academic and practitioner publications, conferences, presentations, and Web site resources.

The policy center's Web site is www.brevard.edu/fyc.

There is a natural fit between strategies to improve the first year of college and the customary work and purviews of responsibility of established board committees.

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disciplinary infractions? When are students "rushed" by fraternities and sororities? Are students allowed sufficient time to become established academically before they undertake this substantial social and financial commitment? What are the risk factors associated with Greek life, and how do these factors affect first-year students? And finally, who is really in control of Greek life on your campus—the institution or the Greek organizations themselves?

• *Class attendance.* Does your campus have a class-attendance policy, and are there special provisions to ensure that first-year students attend class? Is there a gap between attendance policies as espoused and as practiced? Is there an "early alert" monitoring system to identify new students who, early in the term, have excessive absences and/or significant academic problems? Once identified, does the campus intervene in some proactive fashion?

• *The first-year classroom.* Who teaches first-year classes—senior professors or less experienced teachers? Are faculty encouraged to interact outside of class with first-year students? How large are first-year classes? What do you know about the relationship of large classes to learning and retention? When classes are large, what opportunities are created for personal feedback and small-group interaction? What kind of faculty-development support does your institution provide to enhance the skills of faculty who teach first-year students?

• *Common experiences.* What common academic experiences, if any, are in place for first-year students? Is there a special first-year curriculum or course? What else does your campus do to create a sense of community and foster the development of sound relationships?

Bringing About Change. Despite the fine progress in recent years, many first-year programs can be improved. If your campus already has some of these programs or approaches in place, the following ideas may help them be even better:

• *Make the first year a top priority.* Trustees should encourage campus leaders—presidents, chief academic officers, chief student-affairs officers, and others—to make the first year of college a high priority. This includes investing significant resources in the planning, delivery, and assessment of first-year initiatives.

• *Promote and reward faculty involvement.* Encourage and reward faculty involvement in teaching, advising, and interacting with first-year students. First-year initiatives, whether they are curriculum based or conducted outside of class, will not be institutionalized if faculty do not embrace them and become directly involved. Boards might provide funds for faculty development, establish teaching prizes, or develop other formal, merit-based honors. As a trustee of Marietta College, for example, I specify that my annual contribution be earmarked for first-year initiatives.

• *Establish an "organizational responsibility center" to oversee and coordinate first-year initiatives.* Though it is desirable to involve multiple offices in implementing first-year initiatives, streamlining efforts through one chain of command ultimately will produce more effective collaboration and communication.

• *Ground efforts to improve the first year of college in the institution's mission statement.* Mission statements describe the educational purposes of an institution, convey the institution's values and beliefs, and state the goals, aims, and ideals that undergird its operations. In monitoring an institution's efforts to operate in accordance with its mission, trustees should ascertain whether there is a design for connecting what happens in the first-year to the desired outcomes of the college, namely, graduation. Encourage faculty, staff, and students to ground their work in the mission of the campus, and administer first-year programs and services accordingly.

• *Consider class size and effective teaching methods in first-year courses.* Before you subscribe to what may be the false economy of large classes, investigate the effect of these classes on new students—their learning, satisfaction, and retention rates. Encourage your institution to provide funds to support faculty who teach key introductory courses. Make sure your campus has some type of faculty-development component that places a high priority on improving instruction in first-year courses. This focus may present an opportunity for individual trustee giving to underwrite such initiatives.

• *Invest in institutional research and assessment of the first college year.* Ask your school's office of institutional research, as well as other faculty and staff who may be involved in assessment efforts, to improve the ongoing assessment of the first college year. Board members need the information generated from such work to make decisions about how to allocate resources. Because the first year lays the foundation for the entire college experience, it should be used as a baseline in the collection of data about entering students. This information ultimately will be used to measure how students have changed during the course of their undergraduate years and whether your institution has achieved its educational goals. In addition, regional accrediting bodies want to know what your students were like when they entered and whether or how they are different when they graduate. The Policy Center on the First Year of College is one of several sources of information and assistance on how to improve assessment of the first college year.

Interested governing boards must place the foregoing priorities on their agendas, beginning with those of their academic-affairs and student-affairs committees; committees that deal with athletics, admissions, recruitment, retention, and facilities design also may need to address these issues. College and university board structures naturally lend themselves to consideration of these matters, as do strategic-planning efforts in which the board is involved. There is a natural fit between these strategies to improve the first year of college and the customary work and purviews of responsibility of such established board committees.

In addition, the board chair could stress to committee chairs the importance of individual committees looking at the institution's current policies and practices with respect to the first-year experience. When setting any agenda that must attract support for needed change, the board chair has a critical responsibility in exhorting colleagues to show interest and take action.

Conscience of the Campus. Board members have an enormous responsibility for helping to shape the institution's mission and values and to keep the campus focused on and accountable for success. Faculty, staff, and administrators can profit from having trustees who are well informed about the importance of the first college year. So many of the most pressing campus issues that concern trustees have direct connections to the first year—the impact of recruitment and retention on the campus revenue stream, student satisfaction, binge drinking, the success of first-year student athletes, artists, and musicians—the list goes on.

We need to encourage our nation to continue to provide broad access to higher education, but we must do our part to foster greater support for ultimate degree attainment. Meeting these goals will require boards to consider reinvigorating our support for new students. As many trustees have found in their own professional organizations and on other boards, academic leaders need encouragement to "think outside the box" and strengthen this most critical institutional foundation known as the first college year. To fail to encourage them is to condone the status quo, which on many campuses means tolerating too much student failure. Trustees, who serve as the conscience for the campus, often are the strongest advocates for the needs of students. I hope you and your fellow trustees will accept this challenge and push your institution to a higher level of commitment to the success of first-year students. ◇

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This Issue

A Strong Start

BY SUSAN WHEALLER JOHNSTON

I first met John Gardner when he came to the campus where I worked and performed a miracle. With John's help, our faculty, student-affairs personnel, and administrators came together to focus on one issue: increasing the retention rate of our students. Following his advice, and using the support available through research he had published and conferences he had organized, we instituted major changes in academic advising and freshman orientation and created a seminar for all first-year students. The miracle? Not only did the retention rate increase, but we also found the new seminar to be a wonderful activity for faculty development and renewal. The cross-disciplinary approach to student success was good for the entire campus.

Our experience was not singular, as this issue of *Priorities* reveals. For the past 20 years, John Gardner has been known nationally and internationally as the leader of the first-year experience movement. He has researched, written, and spoken on why and how colleges and universities can enhance the experience of their first-year students. Hundreds of institutions have listened, and as a result, hundreds of thousands of students have benefited.

For students, the benefits of participating in a first-year program can include improved academic skills and performance, increased graduation rates, and greater engagement with the college and the community, to name but a few. For institutions, these same benefits are powerful, especially at a time of heightened public demands for accountability and improved performance. But when financial advantages to institutions accompany gains in academic performance—and they do, as this essay explains—then first-year programs truly warrant the attention of boards and administrators.

This issue of *Priorities* provides background on first-year programs—what they are, why they were created, what forms they take, and what benefits they offer. It showcases three institutions' first-year programs: Kennesaw State University's program emphasizing student success with a new twist—learning communities; the University of South Carolina-Columbia's University 101, a program soon to celebrate its 30th anniversary and which has evolved to include support for students at other transition points in their education; and the program at the College of the Holy Cross, where the connections between students and faculty are strengthened as they read, study, and discuss the question, "How then shall we live?" The variety of these successful programs speaks to the efficacy of matching student needs, institutional goals, and proven strategies for first-year programs.

Most important, this issue of *Priorities* argues for greater board awareness and monitoring of first-year programs. For these programs to continue to serve the needs of students—students whose backgrounds are increasingly diverse and whose preparation for higher education is decreasingly sufficient—they must be adequately funded, staffed, evaluated, and valued. In serving the needs of students through effective first-year programs, institutions not only act on their promise of education, they also stand to gain in important ways: increased retention and graduation rates, stronger academic performance, better satisfied students and faculty, a healthier student body, and a more engaged core of alumni. It's a lot to promise, but as John Gardner can prove, it's possible with attention to the first year of college.

—Susan Whealler Johnston is AGB's director of private-sector programs.

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